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Feast or Famine?
A Response to Two Recent RFC's About Network Information

In RFC 514, Will Kantrowitz returns to the theme of his superb RFC 459: there are too many people spending too much time asking for too much information about Network Hosts. In RFC 519, John Pickens returns to the theme of his rather querulous RFC 369: it's not easy to learn how to use Network Hosts. On the one hand, it would seem that there's a veritable feast of information going around; on the other hand, it would seem that there's a terrible famine. Can this apparent contradiction be resolved?

I think it can be, and will attempt to do so after making a few observations about the respective poles. In regard to the issues Kantrowitz raises, matters are perhaps even worse for the "big" Servers than for the experimental ones: we have something like 50 cubic feet of system listings for Multics, plus untold user-supplied programs which might be of interest, plus several thousand employees (if our "site" is construed to mean M.I.T. as a whole) -- surely They didn't want all that, even before the request was withdrawn.

But what of the issues Pickens raises? Surely prospective users ought to have some means of learning about the resources available. The point, it seems to me, is that they do ... but they aren't using them. As Network Technical Liason for Multics, I've never heard from any of the U.C.S.B. investigators. I don't even recall their having requested a Multics Programmers' Manual, despite the fact that our Resource Notebook section offers one to any Network site, on request. I do recall seeing instance after instance of botched login attempts from them in our error logs, though. (I called their Liason to alert him to the problem, but they weren't in touch with him either.) I also recall saying time after time, after seeing them floundering around, "It's a pity nooody reads the Resource Notebook."

That, I think, is the key: we have a Resource Notebook; it lists Technical Liasons; it gives information about the Hosts thought to be relevant to Network users; it gives references to other publisned information. Why don't we use it????? Sure, not all the sections are up to par. Sure, some sorts of information are neither contained nor pointed to. But that amounts to a need for seasoning -- the meal is there, and it's neither a glutton's portion nor a starvation diet. Let's work with what we've got instead of charging around demanding MORE or sulking around bemoaning the (false) fact that the cupboard is bare.

Placing the right amount of reliance on the Resource Notebook, then, ought to lead to a solution of the information problem. In its current form, it would have solved the U.C.S.B. people's

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problems fairly completely, for it already tells them to get in touch with me and it already shows them how to log in. (Assuming, of course, that it wasn't the unstated object of their game to do it all with only on-line information.) The Resource Notebook could even have solved the RML people's problems, for had it been made clear to them that global requests for Host information are to be handled through the Notebook they'd have been in touch with people who could have explained why their requests were inappropriate. (And on close decisions, the Resource Notebook maintainers would know whom to consult with in regard to appropriateness of requests for new categories, I believe.)

This is not meant to push the Resource Notebook as a panacea. Clearly it needs strengthening in terms of content. Even more clearly, it needs wider dissemination. (The planned Network New Users' Packet will show how to get at it on-line at the NIC, I'm told. Even better, perhaps we might want to make it available in microfiche.) Also, this is certainly not meant to suggest that the Notebook be viewed as supplanting the individual Hosts' users' manuals, although it does seem to be the logical repository for documentation of any generic commands we manage to come up with. But I do think it's important for the NWG to understand and agree on the proper perspective in which to view the Resource Notebook -- and I suggest that that perspective should be as "primary source of Host information". To view it otherwise would, it seems to me, be wasting both the investment it already represents and the opportunity it can represent.